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Flanagan, MJ

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“Things are Complicated”: Paul Cornell at Marvel and DC

MARTIN FLANAGAN ¹

Abstract: Paul Cornell’s work for the ‘Big Two’ U.S. comic publishers transfers a distinctly British (mostly English) sensibility into a field where cues normally revolve around American cultural iconography and values. The key to his authorship is Cornell’s homespun method which, unlike 1970s and 1980s efforts of Marvel’s UK wing that transplanted American characters into a postcard-like Britain, explores a British dimension of the Marvel Universe that offers a challenge to the codes of that realm. Whether working with established heroes such as Captain Britain, twists on archetypes like Knight and Squire (English analogues of Batman and Robin), or superheroic ‘big guns’ like Wolverine, Cornell writes against tired, automatic canonicity. This paper mainly focuses on the directly British representations in the Cornell titles *Captain Britain and MI-13* (2008-9) and *Knight and Squire* (2010).

Bio: Martin Flanagan is Lecturer and Programme Leader in Film Studies at the University of Salford, UK. His doctoral thesis (Sheffield) was concerned with the cinematic relevance of Bakhtinian theories, and was published as *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Film* in 2009 with Palgrave Macmillan. Most recently, he co-authored the first full-length scholarly study of Marvel Studios, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, with Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone. This was published in Summer 2016 by Bloomsbury. He is currently preparing new work on Marvel Comics and the history of the brand. Flanagan developed the notion of the ‘blockbuster auteur’ in an essay concerning Ang Lee’s *Hulk* (2003), published in the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (2004), and has published on other aspects of comic book cinema in collections such as *Film and Comic Books* (2007). Other journals carrying Flanagan’s work include *IXQUIC* and *Reconstruction*. He is a contributor to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory* (2014).

¹ I am grateful to Bloomsbury Academic for the inclusion of minor parts of this discussion that draw upon elements from “Introduction: The Road to Marvel Studios” in Martin Flanagan, Andy Livingstone and Mike McKenny, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (2016, 1-34).

Writer Paul Cornell's work for the 'Big Two' U.S. publishers² transfers a distinctly British (or, mostly, English) sensibility into a comics field where cues tend to revolve around American cultural tropes, values and iconography. Cornell's skills at writing fresh versions of heroes such as Blade who, in their original conception, sometimes lacked dimension, stood out. This led to his being given, at various times, the controls of icons Superman and Batman by DC Comics, and Wolverine by Marvel. In a move that was like a microcosmic summing up of his career, DC gave Cornell the opportunity to imagine what modern English analogues of Batman and Robin would be like; he revisited older characters to produce the six-issue miniseries *Knight and Squire*, with Jimmy Broxton (published in 2010). The present discussion holds *Knight and Squire*, along with his development of Marvel's character Captain Britain, to be key in projecting authorial identity in his comics work. The Captain, alias Brian Braddock, was created by U.S. writer Chris Claremont—then in the process of becoming a fan legend for his work on transforming the X-Men—in 1976, as a hero of Arthurian proportions. Braddock fell “squarely within Anglo-American culture wars” (Chapman, 2011, 183) and was revised several times (including, in the mid-1980s, by Alan Moore with artist Alan Davis). The *Captain Britain and MI-13* series (consisting of three ‘story arcs’ of the title, with art principally by Leonard Kirk, from 2008-9) and the *Knight and Squire* miniseries each deal with a version of a truly pivotal hero from the respective publishers: Captain Britain as a (loose) analogue of Captain America; Knight as the ‘English Batman’. They are texts which show how Cornell's writing allows national cultural obsessions from outside the U.S. to be exercised on the terrain of some of the most globally famous superheroes. They deserve primacy in the present discussion because they unlock Cornell's relationship to the forces typically represented by the ‘Big Two’ (Marvel and DC).

Authorial Issues

It is not straightforward to reconcile the activity of a comics writer who is not responsible for the art in their texts, and who works upon a relatively small area of an enormous legacy narrative within a regimented sector of the mainstream industry, with ideas of authorship as applied in other artistic sectors.³ Comic authoring is, in both practical and moral terms, a collective affair, and figures like Frank Miller, Alison Bechdel, Will Eisner and the later period Jack Kirby have heretofore been more compatible with single authorship models—even though they, sometimes, worked with others, thus confirming that ‘[m]ulti-authored serial narratives undermine [...such]

² I leave aside here the more directly American-themed *Saucer Country* (2012-13), produced for DC subsidiary Vertigo.

³ This is leaving aside the additional contentiousness that comes from disputes over the empirical creation of characters of mass popularity before they are published and become corporate property. See, for instance, Weiner and Peaslee (2012, 6-7).

classic notion[s]’ (see Gordon 2013, 223). Nevertheless, as Gordon attests, general approaches to the auteur figure in comics have gathered pace in recent years, and criticism, literature and cinema (fiction and non-fiction) have all started to take an interest in representing the act of comic authorship in various ways.⁴ As an extra complication in the case of British authors, it is worth noting that sections of the British industry maintained a practice of purposely ‘unsigned’ comics (Chapman 2011, 26) — particularly in the case of humour titles aimed at younger children—with the given reason being to guard children against understanding that stories were products of an industrial process. Thus, an impression of ‘authorlessness’ was used as motive to suppress the financial rights of creators in a way that went relatively unchallenged in many companies until the 1970s. Issue #5 of *Knight and Squire* pays tribute to the comics of those days with an ‘unsigned’, inserted double page spread devoted to the antics of ‘Jarvis Poker: The British Joker’ (Cornell and Broxton 2011, 112-13). Broxton provides a good approximation of the well-known DC Thomson (also Fleetway) humour style, instantly recognisable through nostalgic panelling and cartoonish excess (although there is a clear nod to the deconstruction of the same genre by the adult *Viz* comic from the 1980s). Seeing such a style invade the heart of the DC superhero canon has a jarring effect; it says much about Cornell and his keenness to fling the doors of a well-defined universe open to other, nationally specific comics vocabularies.

In interview, Cornell has articulated the act of creatively extending elements within DC and Marvel’s well-policed canons as a specific challenge to relish. Indeed, he humourously presented the opportunity of writing *Knight and Squire* as a way to actively disrupt the previous DC image of Britain-based super-heroism: “I’m aiming to create at least 100 new characters by the end [...] Basically, I aim to be *the* single biggest pain to the people who make the DC Encyclopedia” (cited in Rogers 2010). Cornell speaks here as if a motive is to purposely challenge—make less manageable—the kind of tightly-knit continuity that builds comic canons. What is worth emphasising with regard to Cornell is that a focus on his work shows an awareness of the claims on artistic identity made by fictional universes and that using this awareness, he has taken on a significant challenge: that of lending major characters a British personality and specificity that rings true, while maintaining a recognisable emotional and narrative core (at least, as these stood at the time he was using them; as with most Marvel/DC creators, his characters’ adventures continued in other titles, although Cornell has gone

⁴ Such varied angles range from the corporate intrigue tales of Sean Howe’s *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* to Michael Chabon’s paean to the Jewish-American roots of superhero literature in the acclaimed novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000); and from the documentary *Crumb* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994) to the adaptation of Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini, 2003). Inevitably, applications of notions of authorship become wrapped up in the politics of approaches to understanding comics that are deemed as excessively literary, or filmic; for some of the main issues regarding the recent academic attention towards comics authorship, it is worth looking at Wolk (2008, chapter 2), or, regarding the balance of focusing on writers ‘versus’ artists and other collaborators in discussions of authorship, at Klock (2002, 14-15).

out of his way to pitch stories with new or under-used characters so often that this can be seen as a tactic and a part of his authorship).

Once and Future Things

Arthurian mythology and associated figures, and UK locations, had already appeared in Marvel by the mid-1960s,⁵ but a figure like Captain Britain, as conceived by Claremont (and adapted by others until the Alan Moore revamp) and launched in the late 1976 run-up to Silver Jubilee celebrations, was meant to be different. Yet the first version of the Captain jarred with readers desiring something more local and fresh. Chris Murray points out that the representation of heroes from each side of the Atlantic was subject to major differences as the ‘political fortunes’ of the U.S. and Great Britain inverted in relation to each other following the Second World War, even as the influence of general American pop culture became more pronounced in Britain (2017, 50-1). Hence a mid-Atlantic superhero would have stood as an emblem of Marvel UK’s mission, from the 1970s on, to produce something local, but, initially, succeeded only in blurring American heroism with British landscapes and icons of international recognisability. Cornell’s more open-minded uncovering of a British dimension to the Marvel Universe (hereafter, ‘MU’) instead pinpoints the degree of versatility and intimacy in what can sometimes seem an unhelpfully fixed fictional realm.

The Cornell/Kirk version restores Captain Britain as national superhero figurehead, and powerhouse member of the super-team MI-13, but the team is actually led by the irreverent Pete Wisdom (Warren Ellis and Ken Lashley’s creation). Wisdom is a modernising, Scully-like sceptic when it comes to the magic defined as part of Braddock’s world since Claremont’s day. The series re-introduces Braddock in the throes of a company-wide Marvel ‘event’ (*Secret Invasion*, 2008), with MI-13 reluctantly entering the limelight of a global war with space foes, the Skrulls: ‘Why **us**? I thought they’d go after the States!’, exclaims Wisdom.⁶ It turns out that the Skrulls have been following Britain’s cultural narratives, and have come to possess the magic of Avalon. Rather than the ‘postcard views’ (Liz 2014, 5) of other efforts, Cornell’s work for Marvel and DC veers off the tourist route. Although it doffs its cap to appropriate key symbols, it attempts to find the connection between modern British emotional and psychological mores and a sense of a collective British consciousness, in order to combine these in a form suitable for comic (super)heroism. Issue #2 of *MI-13* refers to Avalon as ‘the

⁵ Arthurian legends and Avalon were confirmed to be part of the MU early on in Marvel’s superhero age. See *Fantastic Four* vol.1, no.54 (cover date Sept. 1966). Marvel Comics. Stan Lee (W), Jack Kirby (P), Joe Sinnott (I). Note to reader: in this discussion, where a collected volume (AKA ‘trade’ or ‘trade paperback’) has been used, the regular citation convention for a book shall appear. Where individually published monthly issues have been consulted, full details will be displayed as in this footnote.

⁶ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.1 (cover date July 2008). Marvel Comics. Cornell (W), Kirk (P), Jesse Delpergang (I).

collective British unconscious, the soul of the nation' but this causes only trouble for the practical, hierarchically-orientated Wisdom. When an issue of *Knight and Squire* sees the unscrupulous Richard III resurrected (anticipating a more humble use of scientific technology in the finding of the King's actual remains of a few years later), he surrounds himself with other kings like John and William II as well as the Kray twins (also referenced in Cornell's 2013 novel *London Falling*), as enforcers. However, Squire—attendant to the Knight—is on the case. In a neat challenge to one stereotype applied to the British, Squire's grasp of communication is her superpower: she senses and harnesses the public's ability to bond to their rulers, expressed through approval on Twitter. Popular support drains away, and Richard's conniving manipulation falters; he is caught out by a modern social world where one's behaviour must be 'felt'—consistently—and not just signalled. Similarly, Batman's brash nemesis, the Joker is defeated at the climax of *Knight and Squire* by a trap set for his over-confidence and narcissistic unwillingness to sacrifice anything of himself. Hubristically convinced that his directness and violence is superior to the more mixed British emotional palette of self-doubt covered by defiance (which Joker parodies in the old chestnut of 'stiff upper lip'—"That must be why you all *talk* so funny"—Cornell and Broxton 2011, 121), the Joker is lured to the 'dear old pub'. Here, the British hero *and* villain communities unite to defeat him (139).

Recurrently, whether working with established heroes like Captain Britain, new twists on archetypes like Knight and Squire, or the 'big guns' of superhero comics, Cornell presents and examines the vulnerability of the hero. This is hardly new ground for Marvel titles in particular, however, a fresh twist can be seen in Cornell's approach to Wolverine. Cornell endeavours to chip away a tired, automatic canonicity to the invulnerable character. A hero renowned for the damage he can do with his steel claws is made to face the truth that, in losing his mutant healing power, it is the change to his *voice* that is noticed by everyone ("It's so *raw*. Like you're always *shivering*", a teammate tells him).⁷ In an arc ironically titled "Hunting Season", Cornell restores a sense of the natural to a character originally proposed as animalistic. This includes Wolverine's ability to age, and confront his mortality (Cornell shows these as connected to his antithetical impulses to join teams like the Avengers while craving the solitude of a 'lone wolf').

This discussion, however, focuses on the directly British representations in the above mentioned Cornell titles alongside selected, relevant prose works. Although Cornell has recently moved back into television writing, the development of two series of 'urban fantasy' novels for Tor (2013-)—inaugurated in a similar time period to his work on Wolverine—has been a prominent feature of recent published work. At a time when he has gone comparatively quiet on the comics front (at least for the dominant publishers), we may still see his Tor publications (the series that shall be referred to

⁷ *Wolverine* vol.5, no.8. Marvel Comics (cover date August 2013). Cornell (W), Davis (P), Farmer (I).

here as the ‘Quill’ [AKA ‘Shadow Police’] books, and a further strand set around a village named Lychford⁸) as furthering an interest in the productively awkward application of certain American genre formulas in very British contexts and idioms. These include cop units tackling their own explosive internal differences as well as criminals (Quill series), and occult happenings in isolated country villages (Lychford). The supernatural events endured by James Quill’s team starting with *London Falling*, for instance, grow directly out of the hidden history of the capital, touching on London’s monarchical history, modes of transport, football teams and the operating context of the Metropolitan Police Force itself.

Characters, Situations, Traditions

“You make epics out of domestic trivia!” –
Skrull Leader to Faiza Hussain of MI-13⁹

A fuller introduction to one or two key characters is needed. Brian Braddock blended the ‘studious side’ of young Peter Parker (alter-ego of Spider-Man, perhaps the most urban-identified MU hero¹⁰) with the ‘nationalistic overtones’ attached to the mantle of post-Arthurian protector of Albion in order to form Captain Britain (Torregrossa 2004, 248). The Knight (alias of Cyril Sheldrake) in *Knight and Squire* is another figure combining myths, including those of the courtly type and those deriving from Batman, in whose canon the Cornell mini-series officially sits. The identity of Knight, though, has deeper origins as ‘The Batman of England!’, with his first incarnation emerging in DC’s ‘Golden Age’ after the Second World War, from 1950 to 1951.¹¹

An element of domestication is vital to Cornell’s method but it is important to understand that his take on the aestheticized British ‘domestic’ as filtered through soaps, sitcoms and genre vehicles is not a trivialising one. The gravitas and idealisation of Marvel/DC superheroes—the intensity of a Blade, or the sheer contemptuousness of a Joker—is ‘cut down to size’ by the moderating British perspective lent by this fictional repertoire. There is often a comparative sensibility at work when Cornell takes on relations between Britain and the United States. Even in projects not involving a British context (featuring, for instance, the alien Superman or the Canadian Wolverine), Cornell takes up, and tries to complicate, the most iconic and essential markers of the

⁸ The Quill series commenced with *London Falling*, followed by *The Severed Streets* (2014) and *Who Killed Sherlock Holmes?* (2016). Two Lychford novellas have so far been published, in 2015 and 2016.

⁹ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.3 (cover date Sept. 2008). Cornell (W), Kirk (P), Delpergang (I).

¹⁰ Marvel ensures the comparison won’t be lost on readers when Cap meets Spider-Man in *Marvel Team-Up* (vol.1, no.65 [cover date Jan. 1978]. Chris Claremont [W], John Byrne [A]). Spidey’s famous slogan of ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ is worked into a condensed rehashing of Braddock’s origin, spoken by mystical Roma and Spider-Man even muses, ‘He [...] reminds me of me!’

¹¹ *Batman* vol. 1, no.62 (cover date Jan. 1951). DC Comics. Story: ‘The Batman of England!’, Bill Finger (W), Dick Sprang (P), Charles Paris (I).

superhero that many would leave untouched. Usually, these fictional trappings and extensions are fixed in a North American frame of reference. Cornell is too young to have worked directly for the acclaimed set-up at Marvel UK,¹² which expanded from uncreative packaging of U.S. reprints to concocting its own heroes in a fertile period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, traces of those times are laced through his writing of MI-13, both in terms of characters he inherits (Pete Wisdom and Meggan Puceanu [created by Alans Moore and Davis]), and the ones he co-invents with Kirk (such as Faiza Hussain).

It is unlikely that any reader would miss the dependence of Cornell's aesthetic on the culture of television. In this medium, he has enjoyed scripting success on *Doctor Who*¹³, and, recently, with another British icon, Sherlock Holmes, in CBS TV's *Elementary*.¹⁴ In fact, this preference in his work increases the sense of antipathy to the blockbuster visual scale and narrative decompression that is often seen as indicative of contemporary Marvel house style.¹⁵ Although cliff-hangers and exciting splash pages are part of Cornell's vernacular, like any other 'Big Two' creator, series like *Knight and Squire* are rather episodic and feature a relaxed rotation of sub-plots. We could cite here the slow emergence of the British Joker as a key character or the 'red herring' that is the introduction of hot-headed young anti-hero, the Shrike (AKA 'Dennis Ennis', a character named with built-in British comics heritage on two levels, Dennis the Menace combined with creator Garth Ennis - and a familiar hairstyle). The echo of the lead character and host of *The Beano* comic in Shrike is not uncommon, for the universe brought into existence in Cornell's work privileges a familiar, eccentric, appealing cast of characters (or, viewed by a different light, a host of repressed or forgotten cultural motifs rising up and demanding attention, including Richard III in *Knight and Squire* or Jack the Ripper in Quill novel *The Severed Streets* [Cornell 2014a]). Indeed, the presentation of Richard in the DC miniseries conflates Shakespeare, British television (the 1990 political drama *House of Cards*) and American comics, with Cornell's note at the issue's end

¹² Kirby (2013) provides a potted history. For analysis of its many titles see also Chapter 7 of Chapman, 2011 (172-99), which ends on a discussion of Cornell's revival of Captain Britain.

¹³ 1963-89; 2005 to present. BBC-TV.

¹⁴ 2012 to present.

¹⁵ The responsibility for leading such stylistic trends is sometimes laid at the door of creators like Brian Bendis and British artist Bryan Hitch. This is probably a simplification since, in reality, the features of a 'decompressed' style can be identified across all but the most 'old school' creators currently producing work for Marvel (Marvel still employs Mark Waid, for instance, a writer who broke through in the late 1980s at DC, and, periodically, 1970s veterans such as Jim Starlin and Gerry Conway). We might summarise a 'decompressed' approach as creatively led by two structural goals: the planning of individual issues to fit arcs that match the preset page limits of collected volumes sold in bookstores (recognised, deleteriously, by fans as 'writing for the trade') and the need to have individual titles' storylines synchronise with pre-planned crossover events. Discussing early 2000s Marvel practice, Deron Overpeck summarises a 'decompressed' style as one which 'rejected' the economy of previous comic styles, doling out plot points 'sparingly' and stretching individual moments (whether high action or extended character interactions) via a 'widescreen' art layout style (the language used to describe the style foregrounds obvious affinities to the blockbuster films that were already determining many consumers' main experience of superheroes). It also saw "storylines [...] expanded to cover six or more issues [which] offered fewer actions per page" and attracted criticism about dilated storylines. Overpeck goes so far as to call the decompressed approach a seemingly 'permanent part of Marvel's house style' (2017, 165; 180-2).

recommending that he would ideally have readers hear the theme tune of madcap 1970s comedy show *The Goodies* as the issue plays out.¹⁶

The televisual ‘feel’ of Cornell’s work actually reinforces the link to a Marvel UK approach, since the British division itself attempted to capture a blend by forging a system for producing comics that took the best from American Marvel but couched it in trusted British method. The anthology—often, but not necessarily weekly—was “far and away the most common and popular format in British comics” well into the 1990s (Millsted 2013, 41). Marvel UK crafted titles like *Hulk Comic* (1979-80) to attract readers via a ‘variety [television show] format’ (Kirby 2013, 15). Editor Dez Skinn used the characteristically British format to bind American monsters and spies like Hulk and Nick Fury into a good value weekly paper, recognisable to generations of readers accustomed to anthologies from *The Beano* to *2000AD*. Pertinently for the roots of Paul Cornell (who now writes the character in various forms including comics), Marvel UK then took this further in turning *Doctor Who* into a weekly comics sensation in 1979 (a year when Hulk and Wonder Woman television shows, American imports from the network CBS,¹⁷ could be seen alongside the Doctor on British television channels). Yet, though Doctor Who is often identified with Marvel Comics, the ground was broken in terms of UK licensed publication of the character in comics much earlier, in 1964.¹⁸

Formed by such traditions, the *lingua franca* connecting Cornell to modern comic forms is thus, substantially, television.¹⁹ When Cornell knew that his time writing Captain Britain and the other MI-13 members was ending with the title’s cancellation, he signed off their exit with the legend: “You have been watching...”, which was the closing segment of David Croft/Jimmy Perry sitcoms. This is a way of cheerily recognising, and honouring, familiar British gangs from *Dad’s Army* (1968-77) to *Are You Being Served?* (1972-85, both BBC-TV).

Country and Continuity

Examining how Cornell negotiates the saturated mythology maintained in Marvel and DC canons and implants a form of British specificity (and critique) by using characters previously downgraded as derivative ‘composites’ (Chapman 2011, 183) of standard U.S. heroes, shows how his authorial identity squares Britishness with the DC and Marvel brand positions. The ‘Big Two’ sit both as part of North American popular

¹⁶ It is to the BBC’s *House of Cards* and its protagonist Francis Urquhart (played by Ian Richardson), that a debt is owed in the presentation of Cornell’s Richard. *Richard III* is a common reference point for the Urquhart character (Boutet 2015, 83).

¹⁷ *The Incredible Hulk* ran from 1978-82 in regular series form; after a 1975 pilot, *Wonder Woman* had three seasons (1976-9).

¹⁸ *TV Comic* (1951-84) was the first comic to host the Doctor’s adventures in 1964. Television spin-off titles represent an important part of British comics history. See Chapman (2011, 104-7).

¹⁹ The Quill novels rework an unused TV idea, once pitched to producers including *Doctor Who*’s Steven Moffat, as acknowledged in *London Falling* (2013, 401).

cultural domination and, at the same time, as publishing titans within the globalised entertainment complexes of Disney and Warner Brothers. On the one hand, then, Big Two practices, influenced by the global aura of their brands, are not at all nationally specific; on the other, they are steeped in popular, virtually axiomatic, ideas of what the American city like New York (or a proxy like Gotham City) is like.

To express more precisely why it is important for us to understand this negotiation between the local and (what the Big Two define as) global, it is important to remember that Marvel in particular enjoyed a reputation as the most diegetically ‘realistic’ of major superhero publishers (Flanagan *et al* 2016, 7; or Kirby 2013, 9). Yet, countries like Britain were traditionally coded using a reductive ‘postcard view’ that had operated in superhero diegeses since the first few years of costumed crime-fighting.²⁰ Even while the MU detailed invented nations like Madripoor and Wakanda, which exist in parallel to the real map, it depended on the broadest of icons to depict China or France. This was perhaps built into the expansion of the MU itself. While stemming from a period of extraordinary creative fertility, the MU’s 1961 introduction stored up problems for later writers with different sensibilities by establishing (initially) very tight temporal and spatial boundaries around heroes. When a melee of Lee/Kirby creations like The Hulk, Dr. Strange, and the X-Men spilled onto the same, crowded Manhattan streets within two years of the November publication of *Fantastic Four* #1, a universe was already in play, and creative ‘rules’ set fast (which still seemed loose in comparison to Marvel’s chief competitor).²¹ Interactions between heroes gradually developed the sense of an overall *plan*, establishing one of the main identifiers of Marvel’s entertainment offer as it manifests in today’s film and television universe: an interconnected quality (see Flanagan *et al.* 2016, *passim*). As years passed in readers’ lives, the MU developed a galactic reach, and characters from alternate realities, timelines and dimensions (such as the court of Camelot and fabled Avalon, redubbed ‘Otherworld’, in Marvel comics) began to appear. Policing of this was necessary, and fans were the first people willing to do it.²² The events of the MU comprised “one grand narrative [...] everything that happened in one title could have an impact on all of the others” (Howe 2013, 156). A reader, therefore, better not miss an issue.²³ This would one day serve the major firms, including Marvel, well as publication formats evolved towards hard and softcover collections of previously printed issues that could keep

²⁰ See, for instance, DC Comics’ approach in the 1940s: *Detective Comics* vol.1, no.110 (cover date April 1946). Story: “Batman and Robin in Scotland Yard”. Don Cameron (W), Win Mortimer (A).

²¹ The ‘Marvel Method’ of writer-artist/plotter collaboration used to construct stories is generally regarded as encouraging more innovation, compared to DC’s more cautious scripted approach, in those years. See Howe on the ‘Method’ (2013, 50; 63-4).

²² One of the first to take this task seriously was Mark Gruenwald. Gruenwald leveraged the production of his respected fanzine *Omniverse* into an editorial job at Marvel, becoming a key writer and editor for the 1980s and much of the 1990s before his untimely death.

²³ Pointing, again, to the complexities of an outsider company adapting to reader habits, this problem did not seem to affect British anthology comics; even as Marvel arrived in Britain, seriality was only one mode of presentation, varying by publisher and genre. Episodes that were wrapped up within an issue were preferred in many titles (Chapman 2011, 30).

defunct titles and characters circulating. Yet, later writers were rarely granted the degree of freedom afforded to such as Lee and Kirby in the early days.

To make a little room, some drastic solutions were employed by writers and editors from the mid-1980s onwards; including controversial erasures of existing continuity, and the establishment of side-continuities (devices like Marvel's very successful, back-to-basics "Ultimate Universe" would function as 'sandbox' versions of a main narrative reality - see Flanagan *et al.* 2016, 17-18). It was in a post-2000 environment where such tactics to manage unwieldy diegetic histories were in operation that Cornell arrived at Marvel. By then, a decade after the last significant Marvel UK wave, the company had arguably never consistently achieved a local 'feel' for British content in publications. Rather than consolidate a diegetic MU 'footprint' in Britain, the first phase of original Marvel UK work (mid-late 1970s) had mainly raised the appetite of UK readers for more of the adventures pumped out every month by American Marvel (Kirby 2013, 6).²⁴ Captain Britain, for instance, patrolled "a London [which] felt more like something out of an old Hollywood movie with fog and cobbled streets" (Kirby 2013, 9). Rob Kirby testifies to readers' disappointment at this standard version, despite its much-hyped Stan Lee launch: it was "not exactly what [...they] were expecting" for Captain Britain given Marvel's reputation (2013, 9). Late in the 1970s, Dez Skinn backed other efforts to redress this ersatz quality (Kirby 2013, 15). Being faced with the complexity of reaching this aim with the vehicle of a regular, American-born superhero (as in his TV-influenced *Hulk Comic* see Buttery 2013, 37) was enough to make Skinn resort to a proven, intergalactic—yet demonstrably British—television hero for the most successful launch of his spell at Marvel UK: *Doctor Who Weekly*.²⁵ 'Anglophile' Chris Claremont's solution—in the form of Captain Britain—was the product of U.S. Marvel talent, and did not survive as a lasting fix.

'A Very British Mix'

British readers had yet to be presented with British heroes that transcended formulae born of the urban United States (often dating back to codes established in the 1940s), or who were more than supporting characters to icons like Captain America or other Avengers.²⁶ Marvel UK did extend its diegetic reach with success,²⁷ but as late as the

²⁴ As single, colour issues, these American imports received extremely fitful UK distribution, and were difficult to follow.

²⁵ Later becoming the long-running *Doctor Who Magazine*. See Buttery (2013); also Chapman (2011, 150).

²⁶ From the better remembered British Marvel heroes, Cornell would employ Dane Whitman/the Black Knight—a one-time Avenger—as well as the identity 'Union Jack' (used by several crime-fighters including one who served in wartime team The Invaders).

²⁷ 1990 personnel and sectoral changes led to a new approach where viable characters such as Death's Head were transferred into U.S.-friendly format magazines (their adventures then being collected in the UK anthology, *Overkill* [1992-4]). This phase of success lasted until the mid-1990s, when the line of titles went into retreat (the same had happened to UK material including Moore's Captain Britain run a decade before), amid

1990s, American Marvel comics were still depicting even industrial cities like Liverpool with the iconography of foggy, gaslit streets and citizens improbably using terms like ‘guv’ner’.²⁸ Was it even possible to redraw such parameters, while involving heroes in the canonical mainstream universe? One of Cornell’s advantages is to accept, as a starting assumption, that this is an awkward accommodation at best. Cornell re-evaluates the history of British superheroes—“rooted in legend or history” (Morrison 2011, 51) as they commonly are - in order to re-insert standard characters into a new space. This would be one with the flexibility to acknowledge the timeless symbols of myth—Avalon and Arthurian ideas feature in both the initial *MI-13* issues, and in the prologue to his ‘Medieval *Magnificent Seven*’ (Rogers 2011) DC adventure tale *Demon Knights*²⁹—but with no cost to the careful approach to psychology, and ability to develop with the times, enjoyed by Marvel’s American heroes (from Steve ‘Captain America’ Rogers to Ben ‘The Thing’ Grimm). Regarding his new approach to Captain Britain, Cornell went on record as being convinced that neither the roads of a deeper retreat into British myth nor the roads of “humanis[ing] and debunk[ing]” that would deconstruct Braddock’s heroic status should be taken. He also revealed that he wanted the *MI-13* title to be “‘that magic book’ and ‘that spy book’, too”.³⁰ Consequently, in contrast to a previous popular incarnation of Braddock where he was a member of ‘Excalibur’ (a collective of non-American mutants spun off from Marvel’s popular X-Men³¹), Cornell’s *MI-13* organises a very different super-team around the Captain. This team accepts discipline and hierarchy (which goes *against* Marvel’s chaotic team traditions³²) by adopting the ‘command structure’ and official strictures of British military intelligence for the sake of the results that it brings.³³ Marvel under other writers regularly cuts characters indiscriminately from the ‘whole cloth’ of British legend, as Morrison calls it (2011, 51).³⁴ Morgan LeFay, for example, is sometimes used as a standard magical villain. Cornell, though, de-emphasises the ‘Arthur-like status’ (Torregrossa 2004, 249) of Braddock’s origin to explore a hero who wishes to serve, accept accountability, and to have his team’s actions mean much more than his personal destiny, all of which unfolds in a new, complicated world. A new flavour to the idea of

financial problems that ultimately led to rights to such properties moving to Panini Comics (where they remain today).

²⁸ I have in mind here a story arc where Spider-Man visits both London and Liverpool. This originated in the U.S. title *Spectacular Spider-Man* (vol. 1, 1976-98), and was reprinted for UK readers in the anthology *The Complete Spider-Man* vol.1, nos. 6 and 7 (cover dates April/May 1991), Marvel Comics. Gerry Conway (W), Sal Buscema (A).

²⁹ As Michael A. Torregrossa points out, Arthurian ideas and the emblems of Camelot have resounded in the mainstream universes of Marvel/DC for years, sometimes appearing specifically, sometimes by analogy (2004, 244-5). DC Comics published *Demon Knights* from 2011 to 2013.

³⁰ A quotation from the trade edition of *Captain Britain and MI-13: Secret Invasion* (2008, p.6). Tunbridge Wells: Marvel.

³¹ In the main run of the *Excalibur* title, that is, from 1988-98. Chris Claremont played a prominent role in the series, which was eventually creatively taken over by Captain Britain artist Alan Davis.

³² See Flanagan *et al* (2016, chapter 5).

³³ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.5 (cover date Nov. 2008). Cornell (W), Kirk (P), Delpergang (I).

³⁴ Torregrossa (2004) gives an account of many such appearances from the years before Cornell worked for Marvel.

the British superhero team is explicitly pointed up by awarding, in a dire hour of need, the sword Excalibur to Cornell's new co-creation: British Muslim Faiza Hussain.³⁵ By profession a healer (but benefiting from powers received from alien technology), Faiza represents the ideals and inclusivity of Britain's NHS as much as MI-13's goals.³⁶

Despite spymaster Wisdom characterising MI-13's set-up as "a very British mix of professional and amateur",³⁷ the idea that serious professional behaviour and success requires *sacrifice* is the key to this group. The same idea resounds in Cornell's way of imagining ethics in the Met ranks, in the Quill novels: a line in *London Falling* idiomatically summarises the proposition of straight, procedural professionalism as the antidote to disorientating ontological chaos: "Old Bill versus Old Nick" (Cornell 2013, 381). Of the many superheroic identities that patrol the DC Great Britain invented by Cornell and Broxton for *Knight and Squire*, dozens are based not on powers, but on trades: milkmen, steelworkers, headmasters, miners, mechanics, actors and strippers.³⁸ Cornell's heroes do their duty and then receive their reward: refreshment at The Time in a Bottle, the 'trade pub' for superheroes. A democratic place where enmity is held in carnivalesque suspension by a magical truce device, this is the venue of Joker's defeat at the end of the mini-series and is comparable to later scenes set in public hostelrys in other Cornell runs (*MI-13*, *Wolverine* and even the more fantastical *Demon Knights*).

One of the many contradictions openly, even cheerfully accepted in Cornell's superhero works is that he uses characters of nobility like Braddock and Sheldrake. Yet the stories stress that if one's entitlements are not earned and backed up with sacrifice, then saving the world will lack permanent meaning. If protagonists—whether Quill's supernatural investigative unit or MI-13—will only knuckle down and do their jobs properly then mystical nonsense can be figured out and defeated and cuffs can be placed even on foes who bend reality (as in *London Falling*). Indeed, the journey experienced by Cornell protagonists is often a mixed one, where a sense of one's own talent, uniqueness and control must be kept in healthy check by the need to remain grounded (a rendering of the British notion of avoiding becoming 'too big for one's boots'). Identities are a matter of duty, as well as of nation or desire, magical curse or fortune. In an issue of *Wolverine*, Cornell has a character spell out a pointed critique of the traditional superhero idea of a character 'wearing' their 'origin story' as their outer form (as, to a large degree, did Claremont's Brian Braddock).³⁹ Heroes need to be in the team and able to put to one

³⁵ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.4 (cover date Oct. 2008). Cornell (W), Kirk (P), Delpergang (I).

³⁶ *Wolverine* Vol.6, no.7 (cover date July 2014). Cornell (W), Sandoval and Curiel (A).

³⁷ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.5 (cover date Nov. 2008). Cornell (W), Pat Oliffe (P), Paul Neary (I). The description echoes through the 'amateur', 'strange and harmless' antics of Jarvis Pocker when compared to the ruthless Joker in *Knight and Squire*.

³⁸ The new character list presented in the extra materials of the *Knight and Squire* softcover trade paperback is very informative here. However it also evinces the pride Cornell takes in expanding the ranks of the British side of the DC universe: '88 new characters! A new record?' (Cornell and Broxton 2011, 123).

³⁹ Pinch, an anti-hero romantically involved with Wolverine, expresses the following while observing Logan: 'Super heroes... I guess they're defined by their origin stories? They kind of wear whatever happened to them [...] That choice, to wear something that shows your trauma, to say you're now "the devil" or "the night" or

side egos and personal traumas. By staying grounded and doing the work—whether this applies to Captain Britain, Knight, or Superman—defining values remain in sight. Not co-incidentally, Marvel characters who possess experience of the Second World War—which evokes a repository of national ideas connecting effort, work and sacrifice—crystallise such values in Cornell comics (as is the case with Spitfire, a member of MI-13).

“Stop leaving this &*\$% to other people!” is the reprimand Pete Wisdom issues to the inhabitants of a Birmingham housing block who have submitted to the seductive perfect lives conjured by a ‘Duke of Hell’.⁴⁰ Routine, the structure of the team, and the feeling of responsibility not to leave hard jobs for others to do is where the balance needed to cope with insane times can be found. Many of Cornell’s preoccupations can be explained by a motto drawn from *Knight and Squire*’s first issue: “You don’t need power, you need moderation” (Cornell and Broxton 2011, 29). In context of Cornell’s superhero *oeuvre*, this pithy line almost represents a tongue-in-cheek ‘teachable moment’ offered to American heroes. Furthermore, it accords with the prime value of moderation, identified in recent popular anthropology as a key characteristic of Englishness (Fox 2004, Part 1).

Conclusion

The ‘Big Two’ superhero comic arguably still quakes from a major revision before Cornell’s time, a revision that was powered by the questioning of British writers who came to be framed as an ‘invading’ force (Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison being the most prominent writers with their artistic counterparts including the likes of Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons and Simon Bisley).⁴¹ Importantly, the group was seen as bringing with them a sense of method defined by the famous talent stable of the British sci-fi adventure weekly *2000AD*, a comic that was once, itself, an upstart shaking up a staid and formulaic juvenile comics scene (Little 2010, 151). An aggressive image such as an invasion jars a little with Cornell’s central message of ‘moderation’, yet his creative ancestry clearly connects to the likes of Gaiman and Moore through elements such as the attempt to understand heroism anew through adopting an outsider’s position while wishing to acknowledge the wonder and potential of a huge, popular narrative corpus.

something—there’s something so stupidly *certain* about that. You know—something so *teenage*’. *Wolverine* vol.6, no.5 (cover date June 2014). Cornell (W), Sandoval and Curiel (A).

⁴⁰ *Captain Britain and MI-13* vol.1, no.9 (cover date March 2009). Cornell (W), Kirk and Mike Collins (P), Jay Leisten and Cam Smith (I).

⁴¹ That this is the case can be demonstrated by the media popularity of ideas and characters introduced by that wave, with their artistic co-creators, as well as the next wave of Mark Millar and others, of which Cornell is arguably a part. From film adaptations of Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen* (produced by DC and Warners in 2009, leading to DC resurrecting the comic title in 2011 and 2017), to Millar’s role guiding Fox’s *X-Men* franchise and taking the Marvel Cinematic Universe to new heights via the adaptation of his work in the 2006-7 miniseries *Civil War* (filmed as *Captain America: Civil War*, 2016), and the many works of Gaiman’s that have issued over the past decade.

Moore did this when re-working Captain Britain, and many other superhero texts; Gaiman did something similar in DC's *Sandman* and *Marvel 1602*.⁴² Additionally, although certainly not widely identified with *2000AD*, Cornell has worked for it as well as associated publications.⁴³

Is it the case that Cornell has simply and quietly inserted tokens of a more flexible, homespun Britishness into those rich yet vast fictional landscapes of the 'Big Two', adding the kind of inner feeling for expressions of (modern, non-mythical) national identity to which Marvel and DC Comics previously appeared to be insensible? Or, do his additions represent more of a determined push back against the way resilient commercial systems delimit authorship? This paper has argued that the canvas of popular franchise characters upon which Cornell works provides a way for national cultural obsessions from outside the U.S. to meet the familiar dynamics of superhero fiction and that the compromise can offer something fresh and enlivening. Some of the tropes used repeatedly by Cornell contain nothing 'typically' British. Cornell's re-writing of Fantastic Four, Marvel's 'first family' shakes them out of their textual-ontological moorings, as does Braddock from his own magical roots (in *Fantastic Four: True Story*; Cornell *et al*, 2009). Yet, the relationship between British Marvel heroes and the wider universe is relevant and has been understood critically as problematic. When Marvel action transferred to Britain, initially in the weekly pages of *Captain Britain* and later in other UK-originated series, adventures respected a vast body of continuity, with a requirement to measure up to preset character templates. Some critics see incompatibility with the assertion of aspects of nationality beyond the U.S. frame within such parameters. These include James Chapman who decouples the bond between British specificity and the sprawling narrative of 'Big Two' publications: '[*Captain Britain and MI-13*] is too closely tied to the Marvel universe to allow the scope for much originality or cultural distinctiveness' (2011, 198). It seems to the present author that Chapman's critique misses in Cornell's work a more subtle degree of apparently passive compliance⁴⁴ that nevertheless prises open the flexibility to take a more radical

⁴² *Sandman*, published by Vertigo/DC on and off from 1989; *Marvel 1602* (Gaiman, Kubert and Isanove 2010) published by Marvel in 2003.

⁴³ A strip produced for *2000AD* spin-off the *Judge Dredd Magazine* between 2003-4, 'XTNCT' warps natural history tropes with post-infection, end-of-the-world narratives, with the twist of a genetically modified, paramilitary gang of dinosaurs who are sold out by 'Father', their selfish human creator; their survival means rendering extinct Earth's dwindling human community. Cornell's working with *2000AD* is not surprising, in the context of routes taken by British comics professionals but, given his interests, it is perhaps surprising that he has not worked more on the ultimate British imagining of uncompromising American crime-fighting values: Judge Dredd.

⁴⁴ In a *Wolverine* letter column, Cornell reassures a reader who requests more X-Men as guest stars that the story will be 'head[ing] towards the center of the Marvel Universe' now that 'new readers [are] on board', suggesting the need for a certain pragmatic diplomacy from the creative team around handling such a popular character. The existence of this letters page, with personal responses from Cornell, in the early issues (but notably absent in the later part of the *Wolverine* run) - like the use of a column full of paratextual explanations of British cultural references in issues of *Knight and Squire* - is interesting in itself. Letter pages, particularly enlisting direct responses from the writer, were not editorially mandated throughout the Marvel line at the time of this *Wolverine* series. Vol.5, no.5 (cover date August 2013). Cornell (W), Marco Pierfederici (P), Kesel and Fischer (I). p.29.

approach hitherto denied to earlier generations of creators (as evinced by the spree of new characters created for *Knight and Squire* or the subtle critique of previous iterations of figures such as Blade, Wolverine and the Joker).

As if to demonstrate that the author figure—its freedoms, and its responsibilities—is on Cornell's mind, an interesting extra layer can be identified in the second Quill novel. Neil Gaiman—popular as a literary author and as a comic writer—enters into the fantasy action of *The Severed Streets* in a surprising way: as character. This inclusion took centre-stage in press coverage, and the response to it was repeatedly discussed by Cornell when promoting the book.⁴⁵ An interesting motive attributed to 'Gaiman' is that the exposure to London's occult underworld imbues him with a power of awareness of his environment known as 'the Sight', which then enables him to improve the 'authentic[ity]' in his writing craft (2014a, 175). The Sight' is framed, here, almost as the occult secret powering the talent of the 'British Invasion'.

This no doubt playful example confirms that the walls blocking off fiction from the ontological reality inhabited by authors are up for exploration, just like anything else in Cornell's writing. Nothing is beyond question where a flexible, 'moderate' approach can be employed. Moderation is important to understanding his work: although an incisive writer with a surprisingly unadorned style, a favourite Cornell maxim might be: 'Things are complicated'. Various readings could be made of this key phrase, which appears both on the final page of Cornell's *Knight and Squire* run and in *London Falling* (Cornell 2013, 329). The phrase seems to suggest a gentle rebuttal of simplified images of unity, confidence, and self-possession. This is the tone that resounds endlessly in Cornell works, becoming, eventually, emblematic of his approach to the fictional universes of Marvel and DC; an approach that refuses to allow the individuality of a national culture to fade into the 'postcard' lexicon of homogenized worlds where all roads seem to lead back to battles in New York or Gotham. Any nation within such a universe, Cornell proposes, would still govern according to the rules that its people would understand (much as the 'command structure' and governmental sanction of MI-13 is different from that of the Avengers). Rather than heroes cut to abstract measures either of myth or the conformity of top-selling characters (as the muddled first incarnation of Captain Britain was conceived), Cornell's mission at DC and Marvel seems to have been the cultivation of a local British corner in each universe; protected by representatives who speak, look, work and act in a way that reflects the 'complicated'—flawed, confident, anxious—place that those characters would call 'home'.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Cornell 2014b. Even the title of that piece ('How I turned Neil Gaiman into a Fictional Character...') suggests a stridency about taking on powers of authorial control, while relying on the premise that an exchange in states between reality and fiction is always possible.

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